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HEADLINE: Content, concern in Charles; Politics: The gubernatorial election is on a few folks' minds, if not on their tongues in Southern Maryland.

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BODY:

PORT TOBACCO -- At the old courthouse here, nestled serenely behind the post office and a keno and beer store, Elaine Racey offers a brief history of her town, keeps an eye on her granddaughter Sarah and speaks frankly about this year's elections.

"I'm not very happy with the governor we have," she says. "I don't feel he does enough for the smaller counties."

While she talks, her Charles County neighbor Marie Duffield, a newly minted Democrat, listens with barely controlled frustration.

"Drives me crazy," says Duffield, engaged in her latest political campaign, an effort to get Rex Coffey elected county sheriff. Duffield and others say Gov. Parris N. Glendening has paid more attention to their county and Southern Maryland than any governor in memory.

But, she says philosophically, it takes awhile for the word to get around. Election campaigns can help, she says, but they usually turn into a battle between partisans shouting at each other across a broad congregation of the barely informed.

She and Coffey have knocked on 5,000 doors, and their conclusion is that Glendening enjoys considerable new support, enough to reverse his 1994 deficit in Charles County, where the Republican candidate, Ellen R. Sauerbrey, won by a wide margin: 15,737 to 10,074.

To find out what's on the minds of Racey, Duffield and other residents of this largely rural county of about 120,000, a Sun reporter spent a few days recently listening to voters talk about their concerns.

There are many: growth in controversial developments such as Chapman's Landing northwest of Port Tobacco on

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the Potomac River; where and when to build a bypass; whether to permit slot machine gambling; the value of increasing taxes on tobacco products grown here; those seamy stories emanating from nearby Washington; and how to guard small towns like Port Tobacco and La Plata from the encroaching strip malls.

At Casey Jones Pub near the railroad tracks in downtown La Plata, the fervently conservative Paul V. Facchina predicts that 1998 will be a boom year for citizen participation in Charles County.

"People down here are not happy," says Facchina, who owns a construction company. "All the political nonsense is not high on their radar screens, but it's on their minds. It's simmering. They'll be out to vote and they'll be out in droves."

What's going on in Washington with President Clinton -- allegations of a sexual encounter with Monica Lewinsky and special prosecutor Kenneth W. Starr's Whitewater land deal investigation -- deeply disturbs Marylanders, Facchina is certain.

"Depending on what Starr does," he says, "the Democrats will be seen by September as the party of corruption. The thug in the White House," he says, is the main reason. Glendening will be damaged by a backlash, he predicts.

Charles is changing

But, once again, Duffield disagrees. Charles is changing, she thinks, and she offers herself as Exhibit A. She felt her political views changing slowly and then, six months ago, she had an epiphany.

"I'd go to a party with Republicans and realize I'd have to leave before I had a stroke," she says. The GOP, she decided, had forgotten that government should be about solving problems and serving people. She changed her registration from Republican to Democrat -- accomplishing that conversion with the assistance of her mother, Dorothy Duffield, the Charles County election board chief.

Facchina and Marie Duffield resent the suggestion that 1998 will be a year of abysmally low voter turnout in Maryland.

But the basis for that conclusion is not difficult to find.

In the verdantly suburban Quailwood development between La Plata and Port Tobacco, Mark Thompson pauses over repair work on his spotless white Jeep to admit that he's unlikely to vote this year. He dislikes what he sees as suffocating intrusion by government.

"I don't need government telling me what to do on more and more things," the 42-year-old computer programmer says. If he wants to smoke, sail without a life jacket or gamble, he says, he should be able to without some politician getting in the way.

Not involved

But if he stays at home on election day, it won't be a protest. He's simply not involved.

Nor is Bill Kerns, 66, a retired plasterer who moved to Waldorf from Washington 15 years ago. He can't remember the last governor he voted for. Politicians, he says, double-crossed him once too often -- said one thing, did another.

A member of the Mall Walkers Association of St. Charles Centre, Kerns may have to explain himself to H. P. "Dutch" Detwiler, 77, the association's president. With 3,000 senior citizen members, Detwiler could serve as a modern ward boss, an opinion leader among seniors, who are among the most reliable of voters.

On a trip to Dover Downs in Delaware recently, a bus load of Charles County seniors talked about the

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inconveniences to them -- and economic losses to Maryland -- because Glendening refuses to consider allowing slots at Maryland's racetracks.

Detwiler is another anti-Glendening voice. "I never liked him. I don't like anyone who's wishy-washy," he says. When the governor's political ally, Larry Young, was dismissed from the Maryland Senate in January, Glendening should have been more vocal, Detwiler says.

"They're scared to say anything these days," he says.

Not his state senator, though, not Thomas "Mac" Middleton.

"He'll sit and tell you exactly what you don't want to hear, and you'll still smile when you walk away," says Marie Duffield.

Middleton tells people that Glendening has probably done more for Charles County than any other governor, but he says his own polling suggests that Glendening trails Sauerbrey here. Middleton supports the governor -- but frowns on what he calls overly energetic fund raising. Glendening's personal style, he says, puts him in mind of a "turnip."

He strongly backs Glendening's position on gambling, however. Years ago, Middleton's father almost lost the family farm when he pumped wheat crop profits into slot machines, then legal in Southern Maryland. A loan saved the day. So chagrined was the elder Middleton that he committed himself to the removal of slots.

Recalling Prince George's

All of that history should help Glendening, but his record in Prince George's County is a problem for some in this county. When he left the Prince George's County executive's office to run for governor four years ago, he reportedly left a deficit of more than \$ 100 million -- something that bothers people like Bill Whigham, a former Prince George's policeman who lives in La Plata.

"He left the place in shambles," Whigham says. Glendening granted raises to police and fire unions "knowing he wouldn't be around to make the payroll."

Whigham finds a receptive audience for his views at Casey Jones Pub, where he drops in to talk with owner Paul Bales, 39, who took over the business from his mother. Bales shocked some La Platans by adding a smart new restaurant adjacent to the bar and hiring a chef.

But Bales fears the "big boxes," the well-known super stores and national chain restaurants whose mass-buying cuts overhead, lowers prices and threatens one-of-a-kind places like his. What would help, he says, is a more aggressively pro-business attitude about growth and transportation.

"The county's dragged its feet big time. There are people a lot further away from the Baltimore-Washington hub that are much more pro-active."

He and Facchina agree that Glendening's Smart Growth initiatives -- regulating new development -- are very good.

But Facchina says Glendening has moved too slowly on tax cutting and on economic development. On taxes, he says, "The issue is a non-starter for Glendening." People don't feel the effect of a phased-in, 10 percent cut, he says, because "the hole is too deep. You can't have a household working two days for the government before they start working for themselves."

On business development: "If you go to McDonald's and you're not waited on in two minutes, you're livid. Government operates with a mentality of days. Why should we tolerate that?"

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Impatient and assertive

Racey, who is curator of the historic courthouse, says impatience and assertiveness go way back in county history. She points to a portrait of Arthur Posey (1865-1924), a town father of Charles County who may have known something about a fire that destroyed one of the old public buildings in the late 1800s.

Posey wanted to move the county seat up the road to La Plata. The belief that arson may have been involved gains credibility from the report that all the county's records were removed -- before the fire.

Marie Duffield smiles: "La Plata may be one of the few little towns in America founded on a felony."

And on direct action.

Bales sits on a committee hoping to promote commerce in La Plata while saving its small-town flavor. Marie Duffield has her sheriff's campaign -- and 10,000 more doors to hit. Facchina held a fund-raiser for Sauerbrey the other day.

"I invited some flaming liberals," he says, "people I can't even have a conversation with, and they said, 'Wow, what a nice lady!' "

Marie Duffield says Facchina and the others are missing a central fact of 1998, one made evident during her door-knocking. "People are content," she says.

Content but concerned. In Charles County, it has ever been thus.

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GRAPHIC: COLOR PHOTO, JED KIRSCHBAUM : SUN STAFF, Historian: Elaine Racey and her granddaughter Sarah Cronk, 7, greet visitors at the Port Tobacco Courthouse Museum in Charles County. Racey, the museum's curator, says, "I'm not very happy with the governor we have. I don't feel he does enough for the smaller counties."; PHOTO 1, JED KIRSCHBAUM : SUN STAFF PHOTOS, Anti-Glending: H. P. "Dutch" Detwiler kisses his wife and walking partner. He says of the governor: "I never liked him."; PHOTO 2, JED KIRSCHBAUM : SUN STAFF PHOTOS, Newly minted: Marie Duffield switched to the Democratic Party.; MAP, SUN STAFF, Charles Co.

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